Redefining Horror and History: The Archivist Definition of Mascot Horror

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ABSTRACT

Mascot Horror is a popular genre of horror gaming, and now horror film, but the definitions of what exactly Mascot Horror is can be varied and non-specific. This paper analyzes five different definitions of the genre from both academic and popular sources before creating a final definition coined as the Archivist Definition. This definition is then applied to five commonly referenced games to demonstrate the functionality of this definition.

KEYWORDS

mascot horror, game studies, indie gaming, horror games, five nights at freddy's

INTRODUCTION

Indie Horror Gaming is a field that has blossomed and evolved rapidly over the past several decades and within it, many genres and microgenres have developed. A subgenre of interest that has gone largely unstudied has the title of Mascot Horror, a horror gaming genre and subculture that has shown to be very profitable. One of the larger struggles with studying Mascot Horror in larger academic circles is that the definition of the genre differentiates in every place that it is referenced. Another of the struggles is that many of the provided definitions are so vague that they often end up including games that do not qualify, therefore skewing the data pool.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a definition of mascot horror that references several of the most popular definitions and is specific enough to narrow the field so as not to skew the data pool unnecessarily. The definitions that this paper draws from come from three video essays, one public website, and one academic paper, and references each of their definitions. Each of these sources cites different games as being mascot horror, and each—not including the paper from Rysjedal and Pyke—contains at least one game referenced that does not fit within the narrow definition this paper proposes. This paper will analyze the blind spots of previous definitions and apply this new definition to three games that other papers and videos reference to test this theory. Here, we argue that previous definitions have the right idea about the limits

of mascot horror, but that each has a flaw in the narrowing of the field that this proposed definition does not have.

DEFINITION SELECTION

The definitions chosen for the reflection portion of this paper come from the website *TV Tropes,* Rysjedal and Pyke's *Scary Business: Mascot Horror as Product and Reflection of Platformisation*, a YouTube video by the Game Theorists titled *The End of Mascot Horror,* a YouTube video by Connor Mcgrath titled *Poppy Playtime: A look into Mascot Horror,* and a YouTube video by Sagan Hawkes titled *Mascot Horror's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future.* These sources were chosen because of their prevalence in online spaces, their recent publishing in the field, and their relevance to the genre. Each of these sources, and their attributed definitions, will be further explained further below.

Tv Tropes: Mascot Horror

TV Tropes is a website started in 2004 that is dedicated to finding and defining various tropes. Originating in documenting tropes from the hit television show *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer,* this site has since expanded to recording tropes in television, video games, and even fanfiction (*TV tropes*). The Mascot Horror page of this site was created in 2023, and though it is not entirely clear by who the page was created, what is clear is the definition this page has settled on for Mascot Horror.

As defined by users on TV Tropes, Mascot Horror is an indie horror genre that appeared in gaming in the early 2010s, with the antagonist of the game being a tangible, easily recognizable character that is essentially the mascot for the game itself, using childhood nostalgia to contrast from the typically dark atmosphere of most horror games (*Mascot horror - TV tropes*).

This definition will be referred to in this paper as the Tropes Definition, and is the most popularized version of the definition, as it is not only publicly sourced and edited, but it also exists on a widely referenced platform and is the first definition to appear when the term Mascot Horror is searched. This makes the Tropes Definition a good baseline for future definitions, though it is not without its own flaws.

Scary Business: Mascot Horror as Product and Reflection of Platformisation

A paper written by Ida Martine Gard Rysjedal and Tegan Pyke, published by the University of Bergen in 2025. The focus of this paper is to look at the genre of Mascot Horror through the lens of heteronormative gender stereotypes and to examine the way each of three chosen games exposes these gender roles to young audiences (Rysjedal

and Pyke). While not the main purpose of the paper, Rysjedal and Pyke do provide a definition of Mascot Horror to acclimate the reader to the genre.

As defined by Rysjedal and Pyke, Mascot Horror is a subsect of survival horror that is distinguished by cartoonish antagonists and associations with children's media and is typically made by indie game developers or studios (Rysjedal and Pyke). The paper also talks about the widely cited origin of Mascot Horror being with a point-and-click horror game called *Five Nights at Freddy's*, often abbreviated simply to *FNAF*.

This definition focuses on the associations and aesthetics of the games instead of the more commonly cited aspects of the game, which can include the style of characterization, the implementation of design features, or the simplicity of the fear. This definition will be referred to in this paper as the Rysjedal-Pyke definition, and is the most academic definition provided, as it comes from a peer reviewed research paper published by an accredited University. A good academic base, this definition is quite vague.

Game Theory: The End of Mascot Horror

A video from the popular YouTube channel 'The Game Theorists' that came out mid 2025, this video discusses the evolution of horror in film and in gaming to section out specific eras of indie horror, clarifying that there is some overlap between the different eras (Contributors *The Game Theorists*). From surrealist horror in the 1950s, to the 'Stranger Danger panic' as the video describes of the 1980s, horror changed a great deal with evolving modern fears, something that the video attributes the creation of each of these eras to. The video claims that Mascot Horror, as we know it, was created as a palatable way to sell horror to advertisers on platforms like YouTube through seemingly child friendly characters and stories (Game Theorists).

This definition of Mascot Horror is much more difficult to pin than other cited definitions, as the video does not explicitly define Mascot Horror, but throughout the video's progression, we can see what they believe Mascot Horror to be influenced by. The video makes the claim that Mascot Horror must appear child friendly on the exterior and carry the horror as something more subdued, a claim made specifically in the discussion of why Mascot Horror appeals to advertisers (Game Theorists).

This definition will be referred to in this paper as the Game Theorist Definition, and this definition is from a popular source, as the video shows no citations and is largely based on observation and opinion.

Poppy Playtime: A look into Mascot Horror

A video from youtuber Connor McGrath that came out in mid-December of 2025, this video seeks to answer the question of whether Mascot Horror is successful as horror and uses the popular serialized game *Poppy Playtime* to answer this question.

Much like the Game Theorist Definition, McGrath does not explicitly outline a definition for Mascot Horror, but one can be comfortably gathered from the content of the video, nonetheless (McGrath). According to McGrath, Mascot Horror is a highly misunderstood genre that must contain a child friendly element, as well as an aspect or aesthetic that starts as fundamentally family friendly. The key piece of Mascot Horror, McGrath claims, is that the child safe element is warped or changed at a later date, often in the game, and not at its inception (McGrath).

This definition mentions an aspect of Mascot Horror that other definitions have yet to bring up, and that is that the horror must come from the twisting of something safe, and not from something scary in itself. Referred to in this paper as the McGrath Definition, this is a popular source definition with no academic backing or provided sources.

Mascot Horror's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future.

A video from youtuber Sagan Hawkes that came out in June of 2023, this video discusses and explains the creation and life of the Mascot Horror genre from start to the future of the genre, referencing many of the popular games and medias over the course of the hour long video (Hawkes). Unlike most other videos cited in this paper, Hawkes spends the first seven minutes of his video explicitly defining the Mascot Horror genre.

Broken down into the context and content, Hawkes describes several key pieces he believes a game needs to be considered Mascot Horror. Most important to the genre, Hawkes' claims, is that the content of the game must include the twisting of a seemingly friendly character, often a character associated with an in-game property. This is a typically child friendly character within the game itself that is then turned into something scary through the content of the game, with much of the horror itself lying in hidden lore. The exact definition provided by Hawkes is this: "subgenre of horror media popular on the internet, characterized by its twisting of children's mascots and aesthetics, ambiguous storytelling, and marketable characters, often geared towards children and teenagers." (Hawkes).

This definition will be referred to in this paper as the Hawkes Definition and is one of the definitions that we will build off the most when creating our own definition. This is a popular definition, seeing as Hawkes is not an academic, nor does her use academic citations.

DEFINITION CREATION

The definition that we propose is one created by combining different definitions, as well as specifying qualifications for the genre that other definitions do not contain. We have weighed flaws of the definitions we examined and elaborated on the blind spots that each left behind to create a dynamic definition that can be easily applied to any game to determine whether it fits into Mascot Horror as a genre.

Flaws

Each definition that we have accrued holds flaws with which we have used to build our own definition, hopefully fixing the holes in these varying definitions.

The Tropes Definition is the most widely viewed definition, and the largest of its flaws comes not from the definition itself, but from the lack of specificity within the definition. The page that holds the Tropes Definition also holds many examples of games that it claims to represent the genre, but due to the vague nature of the phrasing of 'mascot' many games that hold no such mascot are represented (*Mascot horror - TV tropes*). The way this has been fixed is by specifying the meaning of the phrase 'mascot' and what it extends to in the context of the genre.

The Rysjedal-Pyke Definition is a very academic definition, but it is equally as vague as the Tropes Definition, with no thought going into what the phrase 'cartoonish antagonist' includes (Rysjedal and Pyke). This definition is also one that is vague in its categorizing of what is considered an 'association to children's media.' Specifying both categories ensures a more specific, narrower definition of Mascot Horror.

The Game Theorist Definition falls into the category of vague and unclear definitions, as it leaves the genre of Mascot Horror open to interpretation through defining the genre through the appeal to advertisers instead of through the content and quality of the games themselves (Game Theorists). This is fixed through a focus on the content of the game as its qualifier for inclusion instead of its surface level appeal.

The McGrath Definition contains multiple specific elements that work well as a definition but is lacking in specificity (McGrath). Another place where the McGrath Definition struggles is in application, as several of the games used as examples do not fit under the title of mascot horror.

The Hawkes Definition works similarly well to the McGrath Definition, with the only flaw in the definition being in the games listed as examples to represent the genre not fitting under this very definition (Hawkes, McGrath).

DIFFERENCES

Our definition puts focus on the title of the genre itself, putting significant weight on the word ‘Mascot’ and its meaning. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a mascot as “a person, animal, or object adopted by a group as a symbolic figure especially to bring them good luck.” (Merriam-Webster). According to EBSCO, a mascot is often representative of an organization and is meant to energize and create unity (*EBSCO*).

Coined as the Archivist Definition, our definition argues that the presence of a mascot or mascot-like representative must be present within the content of the piece of media for it to qualify as being Mascot Horror. More specifically, the mascot or representative character must be the representative not of the piece of media itself, but of a brand or organization found inside the media. This is to stop every Slasher film or popular horror game from claiming the title because the media itself has a mascot, as well as to stop the assumption that any anthropomorphic animal is a mascot.

Another key specifier when it comes to narrowing the definition of Mascot Horror is the connection to childhood and childhood fears that, while not being unique to Mascot Horror, is necessary. The Rysjedal-Pyke Definition leaves ‘cartoonish antagonist’ as a vague descriptor of the childish fears Mascot Horror plays off without any of the specificity needed to build from (Rysjedal and Pyke). To clarify, a ‘cartoonish antagonist’ is one that is not built on realistic adult fears, but off childhood fears, with these antagonists often looking similar to ‘children’s media,’ or, to specify, children’s television shows, popular toys, or children’s entertainers.

These clarifications are necessary in building the Archivist Definition of Mascot Horror.

DEFINITION

The Archivist Definition defines Mascot Horror as a subgenre of horror with deep ties to childhood aesthetics and the childhood fears that are typically associated with the warping of these aesthetics. To qualify as mascot horror, the major antagonist must be a mascot or otherwise cartoonish representative of an in-media brand or company. This brand is often associated with children’s entertainment, but not always.

To qualify as a mascot or representative, the antagonist must:

1) be something that was once child friendly, and therefore could realistically appeal to a child or teenager,
2) and be part of an in-game or in-media brand or company;

or

3) be a parody of a real world piece of children's media, such as a toy, or a television character.

The most important part of Mascot Horror is that the mascot starts as a family friendly character that provides a sense of safety and often nostalgia to the viewer or player. The safety of this childhood character must then be warped or twisted in some way to build horror, often in association with a childhood fear.

If a game, film, book, or other piece of media does not fulfill these qualities, then according to the Archivist Definition, it cannot be considered Mascot Horror.

APPLICATION

The definition will be applied to each game step by step, starting first by asking whether the game has a qualifying mascot. If the game does have a qualifying mascot, it will then be tested to see if the game draws on childhood aesthetics or fears in a way that is appropriate to the genre.

GAME SELECTION

This is a selection of games that have been referenced in one or multiple of the cited videos and papers. Each game has been claimed as Mascot Horror, so the Archivist Definition will test the truth of each of these claims.

Five Nights at Freddy's

A point-and-click style survival horror game released in 2014 by Scott Cawthon, *Five Nights at Freddy's* is claimed to be the game that invented Mascot Horror and is cited in nearly every referenced document of this paper (*Five Nights at Freddy's (video game)*). Revolving around a series of mysterious deaths at a Pizzeria, this game has the player fend off a group of homicidal animatronic mascots while managing power over the course of up to seven six-hour nights.

Five Nights at Freddy's is a prime example of a game that fits well with the Archivist Definition, as the definition was made with this game in mind. The antagonists, Freddy Fazbear and company, are the public faces of a Pizzeria restaurant that targets children as their main audience. These animatronics are not frightening in themselves, but when put in the context of the dark hallways, glitchy cameras, and hints at a darker story, these characters become terrifying. The mascots becoming increasingly warped in the eyes of children as the series of *FNAF* games continue on, *Five Nights at Freddy's* remains the perfect example of Mascot Horror.

Poppy Playtime

A survival horror game released by Mob Entertainment in chapters, with the first chapter being released in 2021, *Poppy Playtime* follows an ex-employee of the company *Playtime Co.* as they rediscover the horrors that have occurred at the old factory (*Poppy playtime*). This game is well referenced in papers and videos alike as one of the most influential and current Mascot Horror games, a claim that the Archivist Definition will put to the test.

Each chapter of *Poppy Playtime* revolves around a different major antagonist, but each of these characters has one thing in common: each antagonist is a twisted version of the in-game brand *Playtime Co.'s* toys and company representatives. Each of the characters appears in much of the in-game promotional material and internal posters, as well as merchandise marketed towards children. Each of the antagonists also seems to revolve around the perverting of a comforting piece of childhood nostalgia, with self-explanatory titles such as *Huggy Wuggy*, *Mommy Longlegs,* and *Catnap.* With every antagonist representing a comfort gone sour, *Poppy Playtime* is a good modern example of functional Mascot Horror.

Indigo Park

A survival horror game whose first chapter was released in 2024 by UniqueGeese, *Indigo Park* follows an urban explorer who goes into the abandoned theme park of the same name and is faced with both the helpful AI assistant Rambley the Raccoon, but must also face the mascots of the park after something has turned them violent (Contributors *Indigo Park (game)*). This game is newer to the scene, but is referenced in several of the videos, as well as by the TV Tropes page.

The Archivist Definition fits in well with chapter one of *Indigo Park*, as the main antagonist is Mollie Macaw, one of the mascots of the amusement park and in-game television series. Originally a face of the amusement park and a popular television character, Mollie is twisted into a vicious predator in the game (Contributors *Indigo Park (game)*). The game also has many child amusement park themings, to go along with the setting of the game. These factors make *Indigo Park* an effective, modern Mascot Horror game.

Baldi's Basics In Education and Learning

A puzzle horror game released in 2018 by Micah McGonigal, *Baldi's Basics in Education and Learning*, often just called *Baldi's Basics*, is a game that follows a teenager who sneaks into their school after hours to steal back their friends' notebooks but end up being chased down by a power hungry schoolteacher (*Baldi's basics in education and learning*). A game made to parody 90s educational games, *Baldi's Basics*

is often included in conversation about Mascot Horror and was referenced in several of the videos cited here.

The first example of the Archivist Definition disproving a game's Mascot Horror status, *Baldi's Basics* is a game that holds no mascot character. The antagonist is a schoolteacher who, while acting as the mascot for the game itself, is simply a schoolteacher and has no connection to a brand or company. The game does exist steeped in childhood aesthetics and nostalgia, but the lack of an in-game mascot renders this game incapable of qualifying.

Hello Neighbor

A stealth horror game released in 2017 by Dynamic Pixels, *Hello Neighbor* is a game that follows a small child as he sneaks into his neighbor's house to try and uncover his secrets (*Hello neighbor*). This game is often cited and referenced in Mascot Horror discussions and is referenced by several of the videos cited in this paper.

Another place where the Archivist Definition proves the narrowing of the genre, *Hello Neighbor* is often incorrectly included in Mascot Horror discussions when it lacks the one most important qualifying feature: there is not mascot character. The antagonist is a man, a human man who lives in an odd house, but that is all he is. He may be considered iconic and a symbol of the game, but as he has no in-game significance other than being the antagonist, this game cannot qualify as Mascot Horror, despite its constant inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Indie Horror Gaming is an ever evolving field, and the lines that separate genres will continue to grow and blur as more games are created, more media is added to the mix, and more ideas are shared. By going through and identifying the flaws in varying definitions of the Mascot Horror genre, we create a more succinct and more specific way to look at a certain type of media in a way that creates little confusion. Some may call this definition restrictive or too narrow, but we hope that by clarifying the boundaries of Mascot Horror, that we are paving an easier path for those who want to study the genre and everything that comes of it in the future.

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